"Tombs" Begun as "Halls of Justice"

What served as one of the city's principal prisons for more than a century was originally named "The Hall of Justice," but the commonly-used term for the structure was "The Tombs." Even DOC's first official report in 1896 called it "The Tombs." The massive edifice of granite was built between 1835 and 1840, and took up the square bounded by Centre, Elm, Franklin and Leonard streets. Its design had been inspired by an ancient mausoleum that a traveler to Egypt, John I. Stevens of Hoboken, N.J., illustrated and wrote about in his book "Stevens Travels."

More than 20 years before construction, the Common Council had argued over where to build the jail all agreed was needed to replace former pre-American Revolutionary Jail which the British had erected. Finally chosen was the site of the former Collect Pond where there had been a small sheet of water separated from the river by a strip of marshland. The Collect was supplanted by drinking water, John Fitch used it for early steamboat experiments. In the Collect, there had been a small island, the "isle of the British gallowes," Filling in the marshland had been a job project designed to give work to the poor.

Halls of Justice excavation workers encountered the pond and put down hemlock logs as a platform on which to build. Five months after it opened the building began to sink, warping the cells and causing damage to the structure. It was never used for this purpose, the foundation through which little trickles of water streamed, forming pools upon the stone flooring. Masons and carpenters were forever on call, mending, patching, shoring up the structure. The low site's dampness contributed to the building being condemned by Grand Jury as unhealthy and unfit for its purposes. Originally designed for about 200 inmates, more than double that number were housed in it by the 1880s.

Two smaller prisons of yellow brick were built in 1888 to relieve overcrowding. Constructed in a kind of rectangu

ular shape, 253 feet long by 200 feet deep, it appeared from the street only one story in height, the long windows showing just a few feet above the ground and extending nearly to the cornice. The main entrance, on Centre street, was reached by a broad flight of dark stone steps that led to a big and forbidding portico, supported by four huge Egyptian-like columns. The other three sides featured projecting entrances and columns.

Pacing through and beyond the ominous entrance, visitors would find themselves in a large courtyard, at the center of which stood a second prison. This male prison, 142 feet long by 45 feet deep and containing 150 cells, was entirely separated from the prison for females but was connected with the outer building by a bridge.

The span was called "the Bridge of Sighs" because condemned prisoners passed over it on the way to their deaths.

Usually, halls hangings were done in private, witnessed only by the officers and such persons as the wardens saw fit to admit. The gallows were set up in the courtyard near the Bridge of Sighs and taken down immediately afterwards. Before the next male prison was hung, the electric chair at Ossining and Auburn prisons, some 50 convicted murderers had been hanged by the Tombs gallows.

Female inmates' tiers. Courts. Two judges constituted the Special Sessions Court, but its sessions were often presided over by a single judge. Prisoners were defended there by counsel, and allowed to introduce witnesses in their own behalf. The Court had jurisdiction over all misdemeanor. There was no jury trial in this Court, so the accused had the choice of a trial here before the judge, or a trial in the Court of General Sessions before a jury. The defendant's decision had to be made in writing, and could not be retracted once made. Capital cases, burglaries, and other more serious charges were sent to the higher courts for trial.

The Boys' Prison was also located in the Centre street side. The Women's and Boys' Prisons were served by the Sisters of Charity seeking to minister to the inmates' spiritual wants. One room of the prison was fitted up as a chapel and religious services regularly held in it. The week was divided among various religious denominations as follows: Sunday and Tuesday mornings, Catholic; on the other afternoons, Episcopalians; Monday, Methodists, and remaining days for other denominations.

A Warden, two Deputy Wardens, and a Matron supervised Keepers guarding the prisoners. Kitchen work, cleaning chores and the prison was a cage for about 30 boys prisoners. Besides the plain basic food provided by the prison inmates were permitted to have provisions purchased for them outside and to receive them from their family or friends. Changes of clothing also were supplied by their families. Where families were too poor to make such provision, or where there were no families, the prison furnishing the necessary clothing at the expense. Prisoners were allowed visits from family and friends. These were permitted to provide books and other reading matter. Inmates were required to exercise on the bars for an hour every day around the gallery of the tier on which their cells were located. They were allowed to smoke and to occupy themselves as they pleased during the day in their cells. But they were constantly kept locked in their cells, except when out for exercise. As a safeguard against fire, no lights were allowed in the cells at night.

The Tombs was a main prison for detention where persons were confined until trial and sentence, if any. About 50,000 prisoners were annually confined in it. As soon as they were sentenced, the convicts were sent to the institutions where they respectively started serving their terms, except those sentenced to be hanged. These remained at the Tombs for execution.

In 1950 the prison building replaced the Tombs but its chateau-like appearance did not displace in common parlance the name of the original structure whose architectural style had been based on a steel engraving of an Egyptian tomb. Seven decades later that replacement was replaced by the present Manhattan Detention Complex but still called "The Tombs" name persists.